

Sermon, St. Paul's, Fairfield

March 5, 2006

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Lectionary B, Lent 1 Genesis 9:8-17 Psalm 25: 3-9 1 Peter 3:-18-22

Mark 1:9-13

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

OBSERVING A HOLY LENT

In the name of God, Creator, Savior, and Inspiration. Amen.

The invitation has arrived. We have been officially invited to the observance of a holy Lent. It's a rather different sort of occasion, involving time spent in examining our consciences and our selves—and in repenting for the shortcomings we will find. We are also invited to pray, to fast, to deny ourselves, and to read and meditate on God's Holy Word.

The church is throwing the party, if that's the right word, but of course it's being hosted on behalf of God. It's a long event, six and a half weeks, starting last Wednesday and ending Easter Day. And it's long because we're meant to be taking our time thinking over and doing the things mentioned earlier—the praying, fasting, self denial, reading holy scripture--as well as spending time answering some questions posed by God to us through the prophet Isaiah.

God asks, do you think that oppression, anger, quarreling and violence are what I wish from you? Do you not know that a fast pleasing to me would end injustice and oppression; that it would care for the poor, the homeless, and the hungry?

The Lord Jesus contributed to the invitation as well. He sent along instructions that as we pray and fast and sacrifice, we're meant to do it for the right reason. The wrong reason would be to impress other people. The right reason would be to walk more closely with God.

Praying, fasting, denying ourselves, reading and meditating on God's Holy word, ending oppression, anger, quarreling, and violence; caring for the poor, the homeless, and the hungry. Doing it because of the importance of our relationship with God. Suddenly, six and a half weeks seems like a ridiculously short time. And we realize that Lent is not

meant to be an isolated period of time for doing good works and beginning new ways, as much as it is an opportunity to revisit and refresh, to deepen what is hopefully already going on in our lives, and will continue to go on in our lives when this season has come and gone. This is a good thing, as Martha might say.

So how is it that this good thing has become boiled down to lists of things to do, and lists of things not to do?

Should we get up earlier so that we can add some extra time to our morning devotionals? Or should we do a different morning devotional during lent? Or if morning devotionals are not our thing, should we spend some time just before bed every night reading a different book of the Bible—there are lots of short ones--or perhaps some great spiritual classic? The Imitation of Christ, perhaps, or The Cloud of Unknowing? Should we give extra money to charity, or make more time to cook meals for a soup kitchen or sort cans at a food pantry? Perhaps we should drop a quarter in a jar if we say a swear word. Or we could attend a healing service somewhere, or go to Compline on Thursdays, or to any of the Lenten concerts which abound. And then, of course, there is always the Fish-on-Fridays approach, or the ever popular chocolate fast.

Which do we do? One or two? A few? None at all? Or something entirely different?

As a child raised in the Congregational Church, I can remember feeling quite envious when I would hear my little Roman Catholic friend Gloria announcing that she wouldn't eat candy again until Easter morning. I didn't want to give up candy, mind you, but I liked the idea of appearing holy enough to do it. As adults, we realize that a fast is not something to impress your friends; it's meant to be something which reminds us that life is temporal, that all things are passing away, that what remains, what lasts forever, is our relationship with the Lord. So, if chocolate is what we worship, rather than God, giving it up makes some sense.

Clearly, there are as many choices to make for a meaningful Lent as there are people to make the choices. But there is only one necessity. And that is a necessity from which all our choices grow. Jesus Christ. We cannot have Lent without Jesus. If we are in a relationship with the Lord Jesus, we already know this. If we are not, or if our relationship has grown a bit dusty, this is the perfect time to begin again.

The logical starting place is to ask ourselves this question: what do we usually do if we lose touch with someone we love? How do we renew that connection? We might call them. E-mail them. Write a letter, snail mail. In some way, we take steps in order to re-establish communication.

It's worth thinking about: what might we say if we were calling Jesus on the phone or writing him a letter? What would we want to tell him? What might we want to ask? I suppose the most important thing is the most obvious, the simplest thing: please, help me to know you better. Teach me, guide me, show me, so that I feel your presence alive within me and all around me. So that I can be one of those people who say they have a

personal relationship with you—and so that I can mean it and understand what it means. So that I can live your presence in the world and in my life.

We can ask Jesus for this every day, on waking, at meals, at bedtime, whenever we think of it. We can even ask him to remind us to ask him, if we forget. Which, of course, we call praying. We can talk, we can listen, we can share our thoughts and feelings, asking for help for ourselves or others—asking for help from the capital S Someone we know can really help. Conversation with an extraordinarily wise and powerful friend and savior. Spending time together, sharing deeply, the way we build any close relationship. The way we do when we love someone.

Do you remember how bored all your friends got, listening to stories about your first love? Do you remember longing to see the person as much as possible; every minute apart was filled with thoughts of this other person? Do you recall poring over photographs, reading and rereading letters, thinking of your story, your life together? Surely this is why we're advised during Lent to read the gospels, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; to think about that story, that life, to dwell on it, to relive it, and to meditate on how it fits into and affects our lives, today. To meditate on how having Jesus in our lives changes everything.

Revitalizing or building a relationship involves remembering. As we do, weekly, during our Eucharistic celebration. Jesus asks, when we share our sacred meal, his sacred meal, that we remember him when we eat and drink.

We could spend this Lent studying paintings offered by generations of artists who have been moved by the life of Jesus. We could spend it listening to music like “The St. Matthew Passion,” or watching films, like “Godspell” or Franco Zeffirelli’s “Jesus of Nazareth” or “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” We could spend it reading the gospels—and even reading the recently discovered Gnostic gospels. We could spend it doing good works at a soup kitchen. Or deciding to be more compassionate and understanding with someone we find particularly difficult. Whatever draws us during this season will be filled with the Spirit of Jesus, if we ask that it be so.

Because when our Lent begins with seeking the presence of Jesus, all the other questions will be answered. We will know which things to do and what not to do. And, with Jesus in our lives, we will even have the support and the courage we need to begin the self examination the prayer book recommends; to look into some of those darker places inside us, and to begin, or to continue, to let the light of Christ illumine them.

Today, as we receive the Lord Jesus physically, emotionally and spiritually, may we enter through him into a Holy Lent. Amen.